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ABSTRACT

During six months of the 1969-70 school year, Queens College was besieged by demonstrations by the black and Puerto Rican Student-Faculty-Counselor Coalition. While the situation was similar to that at other campuses in that drastic polarization and racial animosities were exacerbated, it was unique in one crucial aspect. Demonstrations at other colleges were generally directed toward creation of Black Studies programs and increased black student enrollment. The conflict at Queens, however, was about the way in which Operation SEEK, a remedial program for black students, was to be run. Perhaps for the first time, the principles of Black Power were being applied to preparing students from ghetto areas for college work. The tragedy of the situation was not property damage or the breakdown of order, but that both sides developed such rigid positions that crucial educational issues were never really confronted. The academic establishment became highly emotional and was more concerned with its own standards than with the needs of the program, while the Coalition placed more emphasis on black ideology, and a precious opportunity was lost. [Not available in hard copy due to marginal legibility of original document.] (Author/DM)

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Black Power and Education: The SEEK Experience at Queens College

by Solomon Resnick

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During six months of the 1969-70 school year, Queens College was besieged by demonstrations by an organization known as the black and Puerto Rican Student-Faculty-Counselor Coalition. The card catalogue in the library was overturned; papers and books in the registrar's office were scattered on the floor; offices were occupied; and huge windows in three buildings were broken. Twice, the school had to be closed. And at one point the atmosphere was so charged that a race riot almost occurred when black and white students accosted each other *en masse*; it was halted only when someone closed one of the gates to the campus, thus preventing a mob of white students from pursuing the demonstrating black students off campus.

The situation at Queens was in many ways similar to that at other campuses throughout the country. Attitudes on both sides hardened, a drastic polarization occurred dividing the campus into opposing groups, and racial animosities exacerbated to an unbearable degree. But the situation at Queens was unique in one crucial aspect: Whereas demonstrations at other colleges were almost all directed toward the creation of Black Studies programs and, in some cases, toward admitting a larger number of black students to the college involved, the dispute at Queens on the whole ignored these issues. Rather, the fight was about the way in which Operation SEEK, a remedial program for black students, was to be run. Perhaps for the first time, the principles of black power were here being applied to the excruciatingly difficult area of preparing students from ghetto areas for college work. And the real tragedy of the situation at Queens was not that property was damaged and order broke down, as many seem to think. Rather, it lay in the fact that both sides developed such rigid positions that crucial educational issues were never really confronted. Yet these issues become more and more important as programs like SEEK spring up throughout the country and as more school make a determined effort to enlarge their black student bodies. Because of the highly emotional attitude of both the academic establishment, which was more concerned with its own standards than with the needs of the program, and

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of the black and Puerto Rican group, which placed more emphasis on black ideology, a precious opportunity to deal with a most urgent educational problem was lost.

Operation SEEK was started by the City University of New York in 1966. Begun as a pilot program at CCNY under a Rockefeller grant, SEEK expanded to the rest of the City University, constituting forceful testimony to the political potential of the black and Puerto Rican ghetto. The funding of one million dollars was approved along wih a $450 million building program for the entire City University system. It was, in effect, a *quid pro quo:* Several black leaders in New York and some black politicians, along with the Chancellor of the City University and some white political leaders in Albany, pointed out that the proposed building program would do little to help ghetto students, who rarely gained admittance to the largely white, middle-class City University system. Because of this it seemed foolish for black leaders to take interest in the building program. To gain their support the SEEK funds were added. By abolishing traditional entrance requirements for the City University (including a relatively high average and an academic diploma) and establishing a program which includes academic, counselling, and financial support, SEEK makes it possible for the ghetto student to have a much-needed opportunity at further education.

In terms of native intelligence the SEEK student body is very much like the regular Queens College student body. Some students are clearly above average in intelligence and have the potential to be among Queens College's best students. A somewhat larger group is above average in native ability, the majority are average, and a smaller group probably is not up to Queens College work. But because of their educational background, the SEEK students are far more complicated. Coming from a ghetto area, SEEK students have all been very badly trained—and sometimes not trained at all—in essential skills of reading comprehension, writing, and such technical skills as note-taking and research techniques. Also, because SEEK students have never been exposed to a rigorous academic atmosphere, they lack the knowledge—almost automatic to middle-class students—of how to manipulate that environment. The middle-class student, for example, knows how to select the material that is most important for the course; he also knows how to cram for an exam, and how to present relatively plausible excuses to a teacher when he has not completed an assignment.

The SEEK student, on the other hand, often lacks these skills. And he is more likely to simply cut a class or retreat into complete passivity if he falls behind in his work. A third complication for the SEEK student is that he feels like an intruder in an all white world. Almost every SEEK student knows that before SEEK started there

were remarkably few black students on campus—and most of these were part-time students in the evening session. The SEEK student also looks around and sees that there are only a handful of black teachers and administrators on the campus and that, until the Black and Puerto Rican Coalition took over control of SEEK, the entire administration of the SEEK program and a majority of the teachers were white. It is not surprising, therefore, that he suspects a hostile environment in which white racism is lodged beneath the surface ready to explode. Therefore, the SEEK student feels ill at ease in his environment.

Ironically the SEEK student is forced to be *better* than his white counterpart in order to achieve the same degree of success. Because he is ignorant of shortcuts that the white student knows, he is forced to learn almost everything, without selecting out the key information that the middle-class student selects. Because of the inadequate preparation he has had in high school, he has difficulty in organizing his papers and in presenting material well. Therefore, he has to compensate either by working twice as hard on the writing of a paper or by presenting more ideas and more factual information in order to compensate for the awkward impression his presentation makes. Some of the students become terribly discouraged and drop out. Although the majority stick it out, even the brightest of them have a terrible time of it.

In reaction to the black program run by a white administration and located in a white school, the Black and Puerto Rican Student Faculty Counselor Coalition (soon to be known simply as the Coalition) formed at Queens. It presented the college with a list of demands, predicated on several key assumptions. Most basic is the belief that the standard college curriculum is, at best, irrelevant to black students and, at worst, racist. The charge is that such a curriculum, by emphasizing mainly western values and thought, not only ignores areas such as Africa, which are crucial for black students, but implicitly accepts the racist view of western culture as the best possible culture. Parallel to this is a desire to encourage a black identity in SEEK students and to teach them about their heritage, both in the United States and in Africa. In order to accomplish this, the Coalition claims, black people must be in charge of all institutions designed to serve black people.

With these principles in mind, the Coalition asked for the following: 1) the firing of SEEK's white director and his replacement by a black director of their choice; 2) the inclusion of more black and Puerto Rican staff members in SEEK on all levels; 3) complete autonomy for SEEK, with the Coalition, the main decision-making body,

unanswerable to anyone in the Queens College administration; 4) the inclusion of more courses oriented toward the Black and Puerto Rican experience in the SEEK curriculum.

Many of these demands were reasonable, and their implementation by the Coalition was clearly a positive step. The desire for more black and Puerto Rican teachers in the program to serve as role models is clearly legitimate. Also, black and Puerto Rican students have a right to learn about their own particular heritage, and the inclusion of such materials in the curriculum (and indeed in all college curricula) is very important.

But, at the same time, some of the other changes made by the Coalition would, in all likelihood, do great harm to the program, for they represent a disregard of educational realities. The main problem is the Coalition's demand to abolish remedial work. The educational reality, however, is that without such work, SEEK students cannot possibly do well in college. But to the Coalition, the concept of remedial work is suspect. The underlying assumption is that to expect students to need such work is simply to say that they are inferior; therefore, one allegedly starts out with low expectations flowing from racist views. Requiring a student to take a non-credit remedial course is absolutely wrong the Coalition claimed, and to suggest that SEEK courses should in any way be different from regular Queens College courses insults SEEK students. This attitude carries over also to the question of work loads. For the Coalition, a lighter course load is simply another reflection of a racist mentality, since it too seems to say that black students cannot do the same things that white students can. Consequently, all non-credit courses were eliminated from the program, remedial work was relegated to a secondary role, and all students were expected to carry much heavier course loads each semester.

To deny that some of these black students have severe educational handicaps, however, is to deny reality. One cannot, on the one hand, criticize the total inadequacy of high school education for blacks and at the same time insist that these same students are ready for a standard college work load. The root of the problem emanates from an emphasis on political rhetoric at the expense of educational questions. Because the obviously correct political view is that black is beautiful, and that black and white students are equally intelligent; the Coalition found it necessary to deny that black students will often need extra help before they can do college work. The relevant educational truth, nevertheless, is that intelligence and skills are separate. To say that a student needs extra work on skill development is simply to recognize that ghetto schools are distinctly inadequate;

it in no way reflects on the student's intelligence. So, even though a particular black student may be much brighter than the average white student, he will still have a great deal of trouble in college because of his lack of skills. To say that the concept of remedial work is racist is absurd.

This emphasis led the Coalition to do several things that may very well hinder the SEEK student. First, they eliminated a remedial English course designed for students with very severe handicaps in writing—even though this same course is taken by one fourth of the white Queens College student body. This means that the large number of students who desperately need more than the standard one-semester writing courses will not be able to obtain the extra work they need. And to make matters more difficult, the number of class hours in the one writing course was reduced from five to four, thus forcing the teacher to cover more material in less time. Again, this derives from a basically political outlook rather than from an educational one. Because SEEK students are to be seen as exactly like other Queens College students, the effort was to make class hours as close to regular Queens College hours as possible. In so doing, however, much valuable time was lost.

A similar deemphasis on skill development can be seen in social science. In the pre-coalition SEEK program, all students took an introductory social science course, which carried three credits and which had two basic purposes: to acquaint students with the ideas, methods, and concepts used in fields which they would encounter throughout college and which they often had absolutely no knowledge of—sociology, psychology, history; and, more important, to teach students the skills needed to deal with such concepts. This course was also eliminated by the Coalition. Students were to begin with Contemporary Civilization I, a very difficult course with enough required material to fill more than one semester, leaving little time for skills work. Once again, the number of class hours was cut from five to four.

This emphasis on ideology at the expense of educational concerns shows itself in several other areas of the Coalition's plan for SEEK. In the pre-Coalition program, students were allowed to take as many or as few credits per semester as they were capable of handling; the only rigid stipulation being that during their first semester the students take a light load. The rationale was that no student should be forced to assume more than he could handle. This flexibility was viewed originally as a major benefit of the program. Regarding this as a racist attempt to hold back SEEK students, however, the Coalition asked that students take from 12 to 15 points every semester

from the very beginning, thus eliminating the flexibility of previous years. For some students this will be fine. But it deprives the vast majority of students of the opportunity to move forward at their own pace and to select course loads that are commensurate with their capacity and interest at that particular point. And in some cases the courses the Coalition has set up are, if anything, harder than the regular college courses.

The math course is one example. Yet, while regular Queens students cannot enter college without three years of high school math, most SEEK students have not gone beyond tenth year math and many have not gone beyond ninth year math.

Finally, this obsession with treating SEEK students like other students, regardless of their educational handicaps, shows up in small day to day problems: In the pre-coalition SEEK program, for example, teachers often used the xerox machine to copy interesting articles so that each student might have a copy to follow during detailed work on reading comprehension. But the Coalition began to suggest that to do this was patronizing and that students should be required to read such articles in the library. As a result, the use of the xerox machine was strictly limited and detailed reading comprehension work was thus made impossible on such articles.

This is not to say that the concept of black power isn't compatible with black education. The Coalition's actions have resulted in many worthwhile reforms both in SEEK and at Queens College. The emphasis on a positive black identity has accomplished wonders for many students in terms of helping them to develop a sense of pride. The demand for relevance in courses helps to change the standard white-oriented curriculum (and the issues of the ghetto and of the history and culture of minority groups in this country are becoming more and more a part of the curriculum, as they should be). As a result, several new courses have been introduced, and most probably many more will follow. Because of coalition pressure, many more students were accepted at SEEK this year than had previously been planned, and this alone is enough to justify the Coalition's existence. What the Coalition has done is to at least raise issues which too many people had been ignoring for too long. In the process—despite their separatist orientation—they are helping to integrate a formerly all-white school, and they are helping to make the concerns of education more relevant to the students and to society as a whole. At the same time, however, there has been a confusion of political rhetoric and educational reality, which may have damaging consequences.

Although the Coalition position seems to relegate the most important issue of black education to a secondary concern, it at least represents an attempt to meet the needs of black and Puerto Rican students, and the mistakes it has made are understandable, although arguable. But the reaction of many members of the academic establishment is less understandable. All too often academics serve to ignore educational issues entirely and do not even really address themselves to the problems. In some cases, this reaction is simply absurd, without supporting evidence whatsoever. Some faculty members were certain for example, that the Coalition wanted to gain control of SEEK only in order to pass all of the students, without requiring much work from them. In fact, the opposite if anything is the case, since the Coalition's plan for SEEK forces the students to work much harder, and the black teachers are, if anything, more demanding than their white counterparts. Where the white teacher is sometimes easy because of a misplaced sense of guilt, the black teacher tends to err in the opposite direction. Yet, time and time again the implication was made that SEEK wanted to teach its own courses and hire its own teachers simply to be able to pass students on a wholesale basis. Other members of the academic establishment charged that the Coalition was not interested in education at all, but simply wanted to gain power for their own personal ends and to strike back at white people in general. Whatever can be said of the Coalition, there is no question that they are deeply interested in education for Black and Puerto Rican students. To claim otherwise is to be totally unfair. A more understandable objection dealt with the Coalition's methods—with the use of violence against property to achieve educational ends. There is no doubt that this question is obviously a valid one and must be dealt with. But it cannot be handled without, at the same time, some serious discussion of the reasons why such violence was used and of the goals for which it was used. Yet such calm discussion was absent in the hysterical reaction to violence.

Many of these reactions on the part of white faculty members stem from an all too prevalent unconscious racism. No sooner had the dispute come into the open than people began to ask whether SEEK had a right to exist at all on the Queens College campus, and whether "those students" could ever fit into a university. Others, confronted with the presence of 700 SEEK students on campus, indicated that they didn't mind SEEK as long as the number of students admitted was only a "trickle"; a flood of black students was unacceptable.

The most common reaction, however, was sudden overwhelming concern with the question of academic standards—not necessarily even the standards of SEEK itself, but

with the effect of SEEK on the standards of the rest of the college. What is the best way to help students develop the skills they need to compete successfully in college? The focus was not on helping SEEK at all but rather on protecting Queens College's standards against what many perceived as a devolution of academic standards by SEEK students (although, it should be emphasized, many of these same faculty members had never even met a SEEK student and had certainly not seen enough of their work to judge them a threat to academic standards).

The final problem arises out of the typical difficulties inherent in the bureaucratic process and out of the normal departmental jealousies which, in this case, were aggravated to the extreme. The prime example of bureaucratic complications was the math course which the coalition wanted to give in SEEK. In terms of the actual content of the course, there seemed to be relatively little disagreement between the Coalition and the representatives of the college. Incredibly, the greatest problem to be solved seemed to be the name of the course. The Coalition, on the one hand, wanted to call it math. This was impossible since there is a college rule which says that a course can only be given by the department in charge of that area. The situation became even more bizarre when it was pointed out that SEEK was already giving courses with such titles as English, Contemporary Civilization, Art, and the like, despite the existence of the departments with the same name on the campus. The crucial difference, it was explained, was that courses like English I, which SEEK gave and called English I, were old courses already existing in the catalogue; they could therefore bear such names. But a new course—even one whose content was approved by the department in that area—could not have the same privileges!!

This kind of departmental guarding of its prerogatives showed itself, in varying degrees, in many of the major departments on campus. It was in part a matter simply of bureaucratic inflexibility and in part of an unconsciously racist assumption that SEEK was not capable of giving good courses. These feelings were surfaced when the Coalition proposed that SEEK be allowed to teach all required courses to SEEK students. The legitimate question to be discussed involves the advantages and disadvantages of what is almost a two-year school for SEEK students; yet the reaction which such a proposal evoked had much more to do with each department's view of its own rightful powers. And unfortunately, although such disputes might have been ironed out in private in a less volatile atmosphere, the fact that these discussions were public served only to harden positions to a point where rational dialogue was almost impossible.

In other words, what the typical reaction of the academic establishment did was to submerge the vital educational issues involved in favor of more bureaucratic concerns. The Coalition demand for autonomy, as a further example, has many arguments in its favor. Precisely because SEEK is an experimental program, it needs to have the utmost flexibility in all areas from curriculum development to hiring of staff. Whether flexibility can be achieved by granting total formal autonomy or not, some accomodation must be made so that SEEK is not caught in a strict bureaucratic framework. Similarly, although each department may be best suited to choose teachers in that area on the basis of formal qualifications, the SEEK teacher must also be able to meet other criteria, such as the ability to relate to black and Puerto Rican students, and the best judge of that is clearly the SEEK staff. Under such circumstances, for a department to concern itself almost exclusively with its own rights, as some departments did, is to perform a real disservice to SEEK.

The reactions of both groups, in brief, fell far short of a realistic consideration of the problems of ghetto students. The one group, by emphasizing political rhetoric at the expense of educational problems of remediation overreached the other, threatened by the situation retreats into a fairly rigid bureaucratic pose and by emphasizing rules and regulations over approaches to problem-solving, becomes incapable of dealing with the issues. As the two positions harden and emotions run high chances of a reconciliation become fewer. And what starts out as an educational issue becomes purely a power struggle. Within such a context, the chief loser will always be the individual SEEK student. Until a way is found to concentrate on educational problems instead of questions of power, these students will continue to be shortchanged by the very groups that should be helping them most.